

A SENT PEOPLE: SENT AS A COMMUNITY OF THE GOOD NEWS

(The following story comes from the website of Rev Dr Mark D Roberts)

Tom was a student at Harvard who had recently joined the Christian Fellowship. Not long after joining he went into a difficult faith crisis where he couldn't get beyond his intellectual doubts and questions. In his heart he still loved the Lord but doubts and questions kept running through his mind. He cried out to God for help and also asked for help from others within the Fellowship. The others began to spend many hours with Tom discussing his doubts and helping him work through his issues. For a long time it wasn't looking good but they kept on walking alongside him and praying that God would affirm his existence to Tom and his love for him. After many months the prayers of the others began to be answered. Tom found some resolution for his theological issues and in his heart he felt God's love in a new way. By the end of his 1st year at Harvard Tom not only remained a Christian but had an intimate experience of fellowship with God and his people.

Tom's friend Liz also walked with him during his year of struggle—which was interesting given that she wasn't a Christian. She often sat in on the long theological discussions he had with his friends. As that year was coming to an end and Tom came to the point of resolving most of his issues, Liz came to him and said, "I think I believe in Jesus too." Tom was very pleasantly surprised and asked her what it was that had brought her to that point. He figured it would have been to do with all the discussion and reasoning she'd been sitting in on over the previous year. He was surprised when she said that, while all that helped her have a better understanding of the Christian faith, it wasn't that which was the primary factor. What made the difference to her was the love she saw expressed by Tom's friends for him. She saw how they sat with him night after night, hour after hour, patiently listening and encouraging. The more she saw their love the more she began to believe in the love of God and the more what they said about Jesus began to make sense.

That's an example of the community of God's people being on mission for the good news of Jesus. It's an example of what Jesus was talking about when he said this:

John 13:34-35 (NIV)

^{34c} A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

SENT AS A COMMUNITY

The John passage is crucial in understanding the relationship between being the community of the people of God and mission. It's as we love one another that people will know that we are disciples of Jesus because the quality of love and care will stand out from the pack (so to speak). As they see the love of Jesus expressed between us and towards them, then they will see Jesus himself. What this means is that one of the most effective ways in which we can be on mission in the world is to be the church as it is meant to be.

Let me remind you of a quote I've used before: *The most creative social strategy we have to offer is the church. Here we show the world a manner of life the world can never achieve through social coercion or governmental action. We serve the world by showing it something that it is not, namely, a place where God is forming a family out of strangers.* [S. Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*, 83]

Individuals or Community?

As I have said many times before, one of the cultural accommodations the contemporary church has made is to be caught up in the individualism of the age. We approach so much through an individualistic mindset and worldview and it's quite hard for us to think any differently. But that's not the worldview of the Bible or the kingdom. When Jesus sends us he does so as a community. Obviously there will be individual aspects to that because any community is made up of individuals, but the primary focus is the church as a community. We share *together* in the mission of the Church, and *together* we can do far more than the individuals working alone.

- It's as the community of the people of God that we are trained, encouraged and supported.
- We help shape each other's spiritual lives and walk of faith.
- We learn from one another and each other's experiences.
- We are able to pray for one another and fill the gaps when needed.

- In a community of believers one plus one is greater than 2 because we are often able to do things together that we are unable to do on our own.

Living As Children of Light

There are all sorts of things we could talk about in terms of what it means to be a community of good news but, as a framework, let's look at Ephesians 4. Ephesians 4 begins with Paul urging the Church to maintain the unity we already have through the Spirit [3]. He reminds the Church that it is given gifts of people with particular ministries [11]. The purpose of those people and ministries is to prepare God's people for works of service so that the whole body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and the knowledge of the son of God, becoming mature [12-13]. At that point we will no longer be infants but will speak the truth in love, growing up into Christ [14-15].

On the basis of what God has done in Jesus, and is doing, Paul is emphatic that we don't live as we once used to prior to becoming followers of Jesus [17]. Unbelievers are darkened in their understanding and are separated from God because of ignorance due to the hardening of their hearts [18]. But followers of Jesus are not like that and so we are to put off the old self [22] and have renewed minds, putting on the new self which is created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness [24]. That's what it is to live as children of light. The point is, that if through Jesus and the Holy Spirit we have been made a whole new creation created to be like God in righteousness and holiness, then why would we live as though that's not the case? Our lives should reflect the spiritual reality. Paul goes on to describe what that will look like and here we see the things which characterise the church as the community of good news.

Characteristics of the Community

Speak truthfully [25]

Churches aren't always good at this because we don't like risking someone being hurt. Further, we're not always good at speaking it if we do, and not always good at receiving it if it is spoken. The reason we ought to be able to do it is based in the fact that we are all members of one body i.e. we are all the same, no one is better than any other, we all need each other, we all have a part to play.

Angry without sinning [26, 27]

Not all anger is sin because sometimes it can be for a righteous reason. Having said that, my observation is that it's very hard for us not to sin in our anger because more often than not we have self-centred reasons for being angry. A church that lives as children of light will deal with conflict in a healthy way and not allow it to go on or fester. If that does happen, it gives an opening for the evil one to get a leg in which can ultimately lead to greater conflict and division.

No stealing [28]

According to Paul, stealing is basically a form of laziness because the person tries to get what they need without putting in the appropriate work and effort. Once again this comes out of self-centredness. The Church that lives as children of light will be made up of people who put in fair effort and share with those in need.

Wholesome talk [29]

Words so easily tear down and destroy others whether intentionally or unintentionally. A church that lives as children of light will intentionally use their words to build up others instead of tearing them down.

Not grieving the Holy Spirit [30]

These are the things that will grieve the Spirit: bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander and malice [31]. That's not a pretty list and no doubt would grieve anyone. Because we are the people of God and have his Spirit within who seals us for the day of redemption we cannot afford to have any things of this nature among us. They are deadly, destructive and cancerous. They come out of angry hearts and evil tongues. Where we see these things or where we participate in them ourselves we should do everything possible to be done with it.

Kind and compassionate [32]

The opposite is a church that is characterised by kindness and compassion towards one another, being ready and willing to forgive each other out of our own experience of being forgiven by God. These things are powerful for building up the community of Christ.

One of the most powerful mission tools we have is ourselves, living as we were meant to live as the body of Christ. Last week I mentioned that in a world where so much is plastic and fake people are crying out for authenticity. That's the thing that will speak very loudly to people who don't yet know Jesus. There is nothing more authentic and more powerful than a group of people from differing backgrounds and experiences, with differing personalities and ways of thinking, who love and care for one another and are able to relate harmoniously. We won't be a group who have no issues, no disputes or conflict, but will work things through in a healthy way and still maintain strong relationships. Because of our harmony, oneness and willingness to work together we will be able to do more in terms of the work and ministry of the kingdom than we are able to do if we were working on our own.

This is the last in the 'A Sent People' series, although we'll be continuing with that theme for this year. I wonder what we have learnt? Has it just been words, or have there been things that have happened or we've put in place as we've listened from week to week?